

Words which we all repeat, thinking  
They're our own, and they vanish. They are more than talk.  
They are what is needed most: what has no name.  
They are cries out to heaven and, on earth, they are acts.

— Gabriel Celaya (translated by Robert Mezey)



Lee Briccetti

## Introduction

Lee Briccetti, Executive Director, Poets House

Welcome. If poetry is the news that stays news, then The People's Poetry Gathering is news from the world!

With 41 other organizations, hundreds of poets, and you, City Lore and Poets House gather to celebrate oral and written poetry traditions from around the globe and from our own backyards. Gypsy, Eritrean, Dub and Calypso bards gather to speak about our shared human experience, and to share poems from the past whose words still reach us. We believe that the many poetries gathered together inform our listening...and provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which poetry is essential to our lives. During the three days of the festival, we listen to extemporized Asian courtship poetries and improvised poetic debate from Sicily and the Philippines; explore poetry's declamatory relationship to sermons, hymns and prayers; and chart the connections between text and performance, from Gilgamesh to the slams on Avenue B.

For many cultures in which poetry is primarily an oral art, it mediates the sacred and lives at the center of culture. In our own society, poetry often speaks in a private, conversational voice. We need this interiority more than ever in our clamorous age. Poetry returns us to the radical intimacy of the single voice and to the staggering possibilities of making art out of language, the medium of communication we always carry with us.

Poetry, like all the arts, is social in practice. While the material demands for making a poem are few and the composing may be done alone, an intricate network of alliances supports the poet's exchange with readers and listeners. In our own society, with its high degree of literacy, literary journals often give poets their first public forum in print. Publishers, distributors, booksellers and reviewers help poets encounter a wider audience. Libraries and literary centers create a visible presence for poetry and an opportunity for sociability, readings and gatherings. The exchange with the poem — the moment when it takes on its independent life — occurs because of these direct and indirect relationships supported by multiple communities. Poets House and City Lore, and all our partners, are delighted to extend these reciprocal relationships.

We gather this weekend with an expectation that there are multiple criteria for mastery. Oral and performed literatures tend to use a more restricted diction, with repetitions and stock phrases (the "wine dark sea", "the gude red wine") to facilitate immediate rapport with an audience. Text makes subtleties of syntax and subordinate phrasing possible. Each has its beauty and range, and each belongs to the present history of our species as makers. A little bit of everything remains — the ballads in the Romantics, the Romantics in the Beats, the Beats in the slams.

So welcome to a deeper listening and to a gathering of the many practices of a great art. Extend, exchange, expand.